

Original.

SUPERINTENDING ARCHITECT'S OFFICE

MCGILL UNIVERSITY

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MONTREAL August 20th, 1909

Report on the general allocation of sites on the University property at Strathcona, and a recommendation as to the position of the proposed Arts Building.

Percy E. Nobbs, A.R.C.A.

To Dr. Tory,

Principal of Alberta University.

Sir:-

Following our conversations of last week, when you explained to me the probable future requirements and developments of your University, and requested me to advise you as to the location of your first building, I have made as careful a study of the questions submitted as the limited time you have been able to allow me admits. By looking at the whole problem of dealing with your splendid property from the broadest point of view, first, I have come to certain general conclusions as to the best location of the different parts of your scheme such as the farm, the hospital, the playing field, and the University Buildings, etc., (see Block Plan No.1 200 ft. = 1 in.); and having set aside an area of forty-five acres (45 ac.) as a lot for the actual University Buildings, I have considered first the general grouping of buildings on this forty-five acre lot,

and the allocation of the sites best adapted to the different buildings which make up a modern university. (see Block Plan Nos.2 and 3 100 ft. = 1 in.)

Block Plan No.1

The plan submitted has been worked out very much along the lines discussed between us.

Having a site a mile deep which will in the no very distant future be surrounded on three sides by the town, I recommend that it be divided in two by a public thoroughfare in continuation of 5th Avenue, giving public access to the ~~Farm~~. the Hospital and the Stadium.

The Lots. - Lot No.1, 80 acres, for the Farm. The Farm at this end of the property provides a larger open space to the south of the University, which is thus grouped between this area and the river.

Lot.No.2, 16 acres, for the Hospital. By placing the Hospital as indicated, full advantage is taken of the clear space to the south. It is, moreover, handy of access from the Farm, and till utilized, this lot can be incorporated with the Farm.

Lot No.3, 16 acres, For the Playing Field. Till required this land can form part of the Farm. By its location at this point it provides open space to the west of the Hospital. It is conveniently placed in relation to the residences for students.

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Lots Nos.4,5,6 and 7, 3½ acres each, for Church Colleges.

These lots occur between the Hospital and the busier portion of the University, and are bounded on the south by the main thoroughfare or public road, and on the north by the main private avenue of the University.

Lot No.8, 8½ acres, for Power House and Yard. This lot might be kept for contingencies, and on one corner the Power House and the College repair shops might be developed.

Lot No.9, 5½ acres, for the Campus. The Campus with the Gymnasium showing both pavilion and stadium to the west side is located here as being convenient alike to the Students' residences, the Playing Field, the University Buildings, and the general public using the public road, and is far enough away for the Hospital not to be a nuisance.

Lot No.10, 9½ acres, for Students' Residences. The western side of the property to the north of the Main Private Avenue could not be better employed than as sites for future Residences.

Lot No.11, 7 acres, for Wooded Park. A broad plantation is suggested as a driveway between the Residential and the Teaching buildings. This strip of wood might possibly be of some use for experiments in Forestry. It would certainly be an element of great pleasure in the lives of those who work and live in or about the University.

Lot No.12, 10 acres, for Professors Houses. The proposal to reserve some building lots in this charming corner of the property for Professors Houses appears to be an excellent one.

Lot.No.13, 45 acres, for University Buildings. A lot of this area will in my opinion suffice for a very long time for the University Buildings proper. Lot No.12 could always be sacrificed should further development necessitate such a step.

The advantages of utilizing this portion of the property for University buildings owing to its proximity to the Town and the River has been so well recognized already that no further comment is required. The distribution of the buildings on the lot is dealt with in further detail hereafter.

Buildings
on
various
lots.

It must not be supposed that the buildings indicated on the thirteen lots represent definite recommendations as to form or area. They only indicate approximately to scale the types of plan likely to be developed, and are for the main part adaptations of actual buildings of the classes required. The Hospital is thus shown with the accepted grouping of long pavilions to the south. The Church Colleges are shown as irregular buildings non-symmetrically disposed on their sites. The Power House is indicated as a building developed in units for 500 HP., and the University Buildings are disposed with the long laboratory, shop and draughting room wings placed east and west with a view to utilizing north light. In what follows an attempt is made to decide definitely the main axes of the various groups of buildings, and the main building lines of

Courts, Quadrangles and Facades. The actual form and dimensions of the buildings and their locations relative to purpose are matters which would require much more laborious study than you have asked me to give, before I could make final or definite recommendations. For your immediate purpose, of locating the first building, I consider such a detailed study not actually essential, but the University authorities should give the matter their earnest consideration before a second building is embarked upon.

The University Lot (Block Plans Nos. 2 and 3, 100 ft. = 1 in

While your assignment of locations to the purposes of buildings in relation to one another which you explained to me appears very well considered, I venture to make some criticism of the lay-out you showed me indicating two great quadrangles similar in type and surrounded by detached buildings

(1) In the first place, the symmetrical disposition of buildings round courts or quadrangles on so enormous a scale lacks in my view any aesthetic value commensurate with ^{the} cost and inconvenience involved. The grouping should be more intimate and expressive of purpose, and the general idea of such a quadrangle is hardly interesting enough to be worth repetition. Twins are not a group architecturally.

(2) In the second place, it is advisable to recognize at once the fact that teaching buildings are things which grow and grow very unevenly. A too severely symmetrical scheme is marred by irregularities which only give charm to a free grouping ~~to meet the requirements of the moment.~~ As much as possible of your buildings should be designed with the simplest

construction on the unit principle, laboratories, draughting rooms and workshops are best treated as back wings ^{say} ~~by~~ three or ten bays long to meet the requirements of the moment, while the main frontages of teaching buildings containing offices, class rooms, etc., can be built with reasonable assurance of meeting their requirements for some time, and falling within formal lines.

(3) It would be extravagant to attempt to design buildings for such various purposes and always growing on such a principle of grouping that their backs and fronts were of equal importance. Applied Science Buildings must have back yards and library stacks are apt to look unfinished as long as there are printing presses.

(4) The ~~d~~ominating question of aspect in all scientific laboratories and draughting rooms must always be that of north light, and when possible, north sky-light, and this does not lead to facade treatment.

(5) The external prospect of the site appears to me to be worth very serious consideration. - The river front is the position for the big facade of the future. The east side faces a street which might well be widened and which will become important as the driveway on the bluff is developed. The south front on the main avenue suggests a group with significant importance, and the main north and south avenue might well form the axes of a more or less closed quadrangle. The site being fairly level has not many external conditions of prospect

but such as there are should be made the most of in every way.

General
grouping
recommend-
ed.

In view of the considerations which have prompted the foregoing criticism, I recommend that the University Buildings be so grouped as to provide a central yard large enough for any reasonable laboratory extension in rear of buildings facing on the various courts, facades, and quadrangles that external questions of prospect may suggest.

The buildings crowning the bluff which will be seen from the other side of the river, should form as imposing a composition as possible, ^{either} ~~with~~ as one great entity by placing the medical school here (Drawing No.2) or as a group with the Library in this position (Drawing No. 3).

The south facade of the University group on the Main Private Avenue might very well have as its centre of interest the Arts Building for the mother Faculty of the University.

The eastern side of the University lot faces, as has been pointed out, a street which will become important as a driveway and here a wide, but, not very deep, courtyard treatment suggests itself to me, with either the Medical Building, the Library, or possibly the Convocation Hall, as a central feature. The backs of buildings facing the court can be extended indefinitely to the yard as required from time to time.

The quadrangle with its main ~~axis~~ on the north and south Avenue might well consist on the east side of the Applied Science group; - the general class rooms, offices, etc., being planned to the quadrangle in a three story block, and the laboratories, workshops and draughting rooms being extended to the yard as two story buildings to begin with.

The other side of the quadrangle could be developed as Museum Galleries, and it is conceivable that in time the axes of this quadrangle might become the main axes of the whole University group, should extension to the west be required.

In assigning sites on the lot to the various requirements of University buildings, I have been guided very largely by your indication of the purposes of buildings shown in your diagram, which appears to me perfectly sound in principle. I have, however, suggested that either the medical building or the library, if it develops into a large State Library be placed facing the river.

The Plans Nos. 2 and 3 show these alternative arrangements, and incidentally illustrate the elasticity of the general grouping which I recommend. It will be observed that in both cases the Arts Building occupies the same position, the centre of the south front, a position which while well expressing its relation to the future developments as a whole, is little liable to interfere with any other system of grouping which might be adopted.

Such, generally, is the scheme which I recommend for your consideration. Its main artistic merits are its diversity and interest and the use which is made of such elements of prospect as the lot affords. Its practical advantages are the the elasticity of the types of buildings to which its adoption would lead and the Aspect secured. It is essentially a scheme adapted to "Unit planning", which is, in my opinion, as desirable in a modern university or hospital as in a factory or

mill.

For the present I would therefore advise the acceptance of the main axis lines shown in red, and the main building lines shown in blue, as indicating the probable future development of your groups of buildings on the University lot, and the placing of the Arts Building as indicated. As to the carrying out of this or any other scheme which may be determined on, there are two distinct building policies which may be pursued, but which should not be mixed up with one another at any period. Both policies involve having a fixed scheme for the whole development of the lot more or less definitely decided on.

The first method would be to regard all first buildings for different purposes as temporary, and to erect them in cheap construction on sites which would not interfere with the ultimate scheme, i.e. plant them anywhere temporarily convenient except on the reserved sites. Then the formal and dignified precincts which mean so much in imbuing the alumni of an university with the spirit and sentiment of culture and education can be erected from time to time on unencumbered sites.

Or as an alternative policy you may proceed with a very careful study of your future developments and erect your finished scheme bit by bit as it is required. Such a policy would require the preparation of a tentative scheme in detail, and if this course were decided on, it would largely govern the positions of the buildings allocated to different purposes by consideration of the growth of departments and their

transference from one group of buildings to another.

While any general scheme of grouping could be carried out by the former policy, which certainly has its advantages, I consider that the scheme I now submit is peculiarly adapted to the latter method of procedure, which may commend itself to you.

I am,

Yours faithfully,

Ray S. Nobbs.

